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THE INVISIBLE INTERIOR: AN INVESTIGATIVE APPROACH

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/ ABSTRACT /

Evidence, n. ad.

The quality or condition of being evident; clearness, evidentness; in evidence [after French *en évidence*] actually present; prominent, conspicuous; an appearance from which inferences may be drawn; an indication, mark, sign, token, trace.

The city today is a networked landscape where traditional infrastructures are overlaid with a constellation of virtual environments that disrupt our binary understanding of public and private, open and closed, exterior and interior, establishing a fluid and permeable space which can be understood as a continuous interior. This complex and multi-layered interior environment isn't easy to negotiate: more often than not interiors, if not the architecture that frames them are altered, hidden, closed off – they become invisible, subtracted from our vision and perception. Engaging in a process of disentanglement the detective makes use of an array of strategies including: survey and surveillance, the collection of evidence, intuition and narrative reconstruction – strategies that we will attempt to elaborate on here, as part of a larger research project exploring methods and tactics for investigating and interpreting 'invisible' interiors.

/ KEYWORDS /

Invisible / Gaze / Witness / Archive / Trace / Scan / Evidence / Expose

/ INTRODUCTION / THE METROPOLITAN CONDITION OF THE INTERIOR

The city today is a networked landscape where traditional infrastructures are overlaid with a constellation of virtual environments that disrupt our binary understanding of public and private, open and closed, exterior and interior, establishing a fluid and permeable space which can be understood as a continuous interior. In this continuous space our perception and experience of the city is under assault – we need to continually shift our focus from reading and interpreting the signs and clues that present themselves at the surface, to penetrating across the physical threshold to access and decode the hidden narratives that are contained within. These narratives are themselves in a perpetual state of flux resulting in an entanglement¹ of interactions that imprint themselves upon the material environment, whilst also leaving an echo in the ether.

This complex and multi-layered interior environment isn't easy to negotiate – in order to navigate our way through we must operate like detectives, employing methods of forensic investigation. More often than not interiors, if not the architecture that frames them are altered, hidden, closed off – they become invisible, subtracted from our vision and perception. Engaging in a process of disentanglement the detective makes use of an array of strategies including: survey and surveillance, the collection of evidence, intuition and narrative reconstruction – strategies that we will attempt to elaborate on here, as part of a larger research project exploring methods and tactics for investigating and interpreting 'invisible' interiors.

/ DETECTING INVISIBILITY /

'Rooms disappear, and consequently any history of the interior encounters a problem of evidence, for its subject no longer exists.' Edward Hollis, *The Memory Palace: A Book of Lost Interiors*, p.9

The metaphor of the palimpsest has often been used to describe the complex entity that constitutes the realm of the interior²; far from being just a material translation of our living needs, interiors are guardians of stories, memories and relationships. Rodolfo Machado's seminal essay from 1976 exploits the palimpsest as a tool for articulating the practice of adaptive reuse, and it remains useful here as a device for understanding buildings and interiors as multivalent³. Further, the practice of making the interior can be understood as one of assemblage and counter-assemblage - an unmaking of architecture⁴. We are interested here in the process of loss and disentanglement that is necessary in order to reassert the agency of the interior within an investigative practice, and the opportunities offered by digital technologies that can make visible the complexity of interior environments, and enable us to imagine and explore new configurations and future possibilities for these 'lost' spaces.

Employing methods of detection that seek out lost and invisible interiors - compiling and scrutinising the evidence presented, and constructing narratives that attempt to reveal meaning - is a forensic strategy that encounters the interior through the framework of 'the gaze'⁵. The gaze is understood as theoretical tool that establishes a relationship of power between an 'experiencing' subject and an 'experienced' object - author and reader, public and private, building and interior, outside and in. Gaze theory has been utilised to expose sites or territories of knowledge and power⁶, and as a penetrative act of looking it is used within autopsy to establish the body as a 'field of study'⁷. Moving from the body to the building, we are interested in the forensic gaze as a way to analysis and illuminate invisible spaces as biographical objects that are both receptive to inhabitation, but also 'vibrant'⁸ in their own way.⁹

But what do we mean by 'invisible'? Many of the interiors we have worked on in recent times are literally 'invisible' - you cannot cross the threshold to get inside!¹⁰ - but 'invisibility' isn't simply a result of inaccessibility. Interiors - both public and private - can be invisible for many different reasons, by chance or on purpose.

In the recent intervention by the V&A at Venice Architecture Biennale 2018, a displaced and reassembled section of the façade of the demolished Robin Hood Gardens by Peter and Alison Smithson, stands alone - the interiors are invisible, erased of any contextual reference to the original project!¹¹.

There are some typologies of buildings that negate the essence of the interior - the capacity to allow exchange between people and space. This is the case with the Data Centre, a very specific kind of building characterized mainly by a mimetic, standardized exterior - that looks like an average office building - with an interior that isn't designed for human inhabitation, and concealed for security.

For the derelict BBC Wing in Alexandra Palace - the site of the first television broadcast in 1936 - the role and significance of the history of television has failed to find a satisfying translation - its transformation into a museum has been abandoned, and the interiors have been stripped of their inner layer in order to remove the asbestos. These huge empty spaces lack a way of voicing their material and immaterial value.

In June 2018 a second devastating fire spread through Glasgow School of Art, only 4 years after the first one caused huge damage. This damage is so significant that discussion is ongoing as to the destiny of this iconic building. This is not just a matter of structural stability, but also a discourse on the material value of the Mackintosh Building. Drone footage, released a few days after the recent fire, shows us a ghostly ruin and makes us question whether it is possible or even appropriate to attempt

reconstruction. Violent endings are resisted in narratives of conservation and preservation - it seems that there exists an impulse to hold on to buildings and to suspend them in place and time, irrespective of inevitable shifts in occupancy and use.

These are just some examples of invisible interiors – others are invisible because they are private, designed to protect their inhabitants (safe houses, monasteries, prisons, hospitals), or secured for particular purposes (mausoleums, vaults/bank deposits). Maybe they are reserved for specific users (gendered spaces), shielded from public view (subterranean infrastructures), too delicate to be accessible (archaeological sites) or just imaginary.

/ A STRATEGY OF DISENTANGLEMENT /

In order to disentangle these invisible interiors – to make them readable - we need to expose the different layers of the palimpsest by literally and/or metaphorically taking buildings apart. The practice of Interior Architecture has finely tuned devices able to create strategies of intervention that aim to understand and re-imagine the past, present and future of buildings. In particular, in the last few years we have adapted existing methods of documenting and understanding buildings and introduced new technologies that enhance our ability to apply the forensic gaze without transgressing the body of the building.

/ SCANNING AND MODELLING /

Scanning and digitally modelling spaces and buildings isn't new, but the technology is developing rapidly, enabling the progressively more accurate and detailed detection of information from within the built environment. Scanning devices are able to capture the distance between two points in space producing a set of information that flawlessly expresses the flesh and bones of the architecture. This technology has the capacity to reveal layers of hidden data, and to produce a photographic image that brings to the surface the lost traces of previous iterations and interactions. The outcomes of these investigations can range from documenting otherwise invisible perspectives¹² or present spatial analysis in legal and political terms.

Forensic Architecture utilise drones to digitally scan buildings sited in war zones in order to evidence the transgression of human rights. Operating within a forensic mode, these scans enable buildings to bear witness to the catastrophic events that have taken place within them, and for this information to be used as evidence within the context of an enquiry. Significantly scan technology can uncover attempts to conceal evidence and to mask truth. The Forensic Architecture project is to invert the forensic gaze of the state. For us, as designers, thinkers and educators, the forensic mode enables objects and environments to speak – to have a voice.

/ CASTING AND PRINTING /

Casting and printing enables the reproduction of objects as many times as desired; imprints of traces and clues are re-produced to be scrutinized, enlarged, collected. The materiality of interiors stands witness to the passage of time within its walls, holding on to traces of occupancy.

In her artwork 'House' from 1993 (demolished 11 weeks later) Rachel Whiteread created a concrete cast of an entire Victorian dwelling that was already scheduled for demolition. The continuous internal surface was sprayed with a debonding agent - builders left through a hole in the roof which was then sealed, and the external brick-built structure removed.

This process, although seemingly crude, picked up a huge amount of detail and information. Says Charlotte Mullins, Whiteread 'had successfully concretised all the pre-existing spaces and marks without repair or conservation, and in doing so, revealed the previously concealed or overlooked spaces within the house: the volume of air within the rooms was made solid and the exact place of occupation was exposed, laid open, made naked and it is this uncovering that was so disturbing; the house seems indecently exposed'¹³. What Mullins is highlighting is the revealing of the interior, its exposure to the public gaze and its ability to operate as a 'material' witness to the past.

One practice whose work situates itself within this discourse of vibrant communication between the material presences (and absences) of a building through time is 6a Architects. Their Raven Row project is the result of exposing a palimpsestic overlay of the interiors as found, visible through the veil of the renovations made. In their collaborative text 'Never Modern', 6a and Irene Scalbert explore the approach of the practice to investigating the site and negotiating a relationship with it - '6a are not in the main motivated by the conservation of the past . . . But they retain an appetite for the lost, unexpected detail, for what was discarded or forgotten in the course of time. 6a work like detectives.'¹⁴ The door handle was cast with a thumbprint signing the presence of absence or the absence of presence – the ghost of an occupation or inhabitation; the practice of 6a touches the layers of history, enjoying the overlay of meaning, revelling in ambiguity and otherness and a sense of liminality.

/ CONCLUSIONS /

Interiors are fragile, rendered invisible for a number of reasons. As design detectives we employ methods of forensic investigation that include: survey and surveillance, the collection of clues and traces, intuition and narrative reconstruction. These methods are employed in order to make visible the otherwise hidden aspects of environments: allow us to expose and investigate without materially dissecting them.

Digital technologies provide us with surgical tools to record, document, extract and reproduce interiors that are threatened, hidden or concealed: on top of atmosphere, emotion, time and memory we are offered new insights and stories gleaned from tech mediation with new metrics that were not available to us before. This opportunity, to expose and narrate hidden stories, contributes to the preservation and transmission of knowledge, but what happens when we must deal with content that poses ethical and political questions? This question remains difficult to address.

/ ENDNOTES /

¹ Ian Hodder uses this term in his book, 'Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things' (John Wiley & Sons, 2012).

² Graeme Brooker, Sally Stone and others have utilised the term palimpsest in order to understand the interior as an assembled space that reads and interprets the existing building fabric in order to direct and choreograph new interventions.

³ Rodolfo Machado, 'Old Buildings as Palimpsests', *Progressive Architecture* (November, 1976), pp. 46-49.

⁴ The unmaking of architecture is a violation or violence that Walter Benjamin would argue is necessary to reveal the instability of a text (in this case the building) and 'to liberate the language imprisoned in a work'.

⁵ To gaze means "to look steadily, intently, and with fixed attention." Most readily associated with the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, gaze theory refers to an 'anxious state that comes with the awareness that one can be viewed. The psychological effect, Lacan argues, is that the subject loses a degree of autonomy upon realizing that he or she is a visible object'.

⁶ It is Foucault who moves the clinical gaze from the body in life to the body after death, describing how through autopsy 'the corpse became the brightest moment in the figures of truth'. In this context the gaze is an instrument of knowledge, where death and the performance of an autopsy reveal a 'visible secret'.

⁷ In an autopsy the corpse is fragmented into what Elizabeth Klaver in *Sites of Autopsy in Contemporary Culture* describes as 'a geography of objects' where the body is perceived as 'a field of study' – this fragmentation enables the viewer to return the gaze to one of inquiry.

⁸ The word vibrant is taken here from Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Duke University Press Books, 2010).

⁹ This understanding of the building as body is evident in the work of Gordon Matta-Clark. Matta-Clark instituted a strategy of cutting into a building, revealing its inner narrative. Conceived in response to an invitation to take part in the 9th Biennale de Paris, *Conical Intersect* (1975) involved the spiralling 'cut' into two derelict sixteenth century buildings situated adjacent to the construction site of the then controversial Centre Pompidou. In an interview in 1977, Matta-Clark says:

'The first thing one notices is that violence has been done. Then the violence turns into visual order and, hopefully, then to a sense of heightened awareness.... You see that light enters places it otherwise couldn't. Angles and depths can be perceived where they should have been hidden. Spaces are available to move through that were previously inaccessible..'. Matta-Clark's strategy is akin to a surgical procedure that establishes a kind of 'truth', identifying the pathology of a space, and enabling us to record, decode and archive the data produced.

¹⁰ In the last few years we have been working with our students in Interior Architecture at Middlesex University on public buildings under threat; Hornsey Town Hall and the BBC Wing of Alexandra Palace are both listed building with a rich material

and immaterial background, invisible as hidden from the public realm. Hornsey Town Hall has been recently partly sold to be transformed in a luxury hotel and apartments while the BBC Wing still awaits ideas.

¹¹ In a documentary about this work, the artist Do Ho Suh presents a panoramic documentation of the estate's modular interiors as they have been adapted, decorated and furnished by residents.

¹² The BBC television series Italy's Invisible Cities, sophisticated 3D scanning technology is used to uncover the hidden history of Naples, Florence and Venice.

¹³ Charlotte Mullins, Rachel Whiteread (London: Tate Publishing, 2004).

¹⁴ Irene Scalbert and 6a Architects, Never Modern (Park Books, 2013).

/ BIOGRAPHY /

Naomi House is a designer, educator and writer. Her specific expertise is in the field of interiors and its psycho-spatial dimension. Focusing on the agency of the interior and its role in informing everyday behaviours, she is particularly interested in the use of forensic methods as a strategy for analysing how objects and environments can be interpreted and animated.

Francesca Murialdo, architect and a PhD in Interior Architecture and Exhibition Design. In the past 10 years she's been running her own practice and working as Adjunct Professor at the School of Design, Politecnico di Milano. From 2015 she is Programme Leader in Interior Architecture at Middlesex University in London.

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